



Navigating the Next Unknown

| How can L&D build the skills organisations need to succeed in an uncertain world?

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70% of employees have used generative AI, such as ChatGPT, to complete a task they were meant to do themselves.

47% of UK employees say they're worried about being replaced by AI, and 15% believe staff need more training on how to use it.

Access Group research, 2024

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Introduction

If you feel like you've been lurching from one crisis to the next over the past few years, with little time to think or plan, then you're not alone.

We've seen economies and supply chains being disrupted by geopolitical events, while the rapid advances and adoption of artificial intelligence (AI) is derailing established workflows, employee expectations, career paths and skills. And, of course, when a crisis hits, L&D teams are at the sharp end of it all – expected to rapidly develop skills often without the strategic power to effect meaningful change.

Disruption is a given, and comes on top of organisation-specific changes, like new strategies or a merger or acquisition. You need to prepare your teams to not only adapt but also turn the challenges they face into a competitive advantage.

They need the skills and mindset to navigate uncertainty: resilience, communication, curiosity, adaptability, emotional intelligence but above all agility. Given all this, it's no surprise that more than two-thirds of employers today value soft skills over qualifications.

Hard skills are, of course, still essential especially

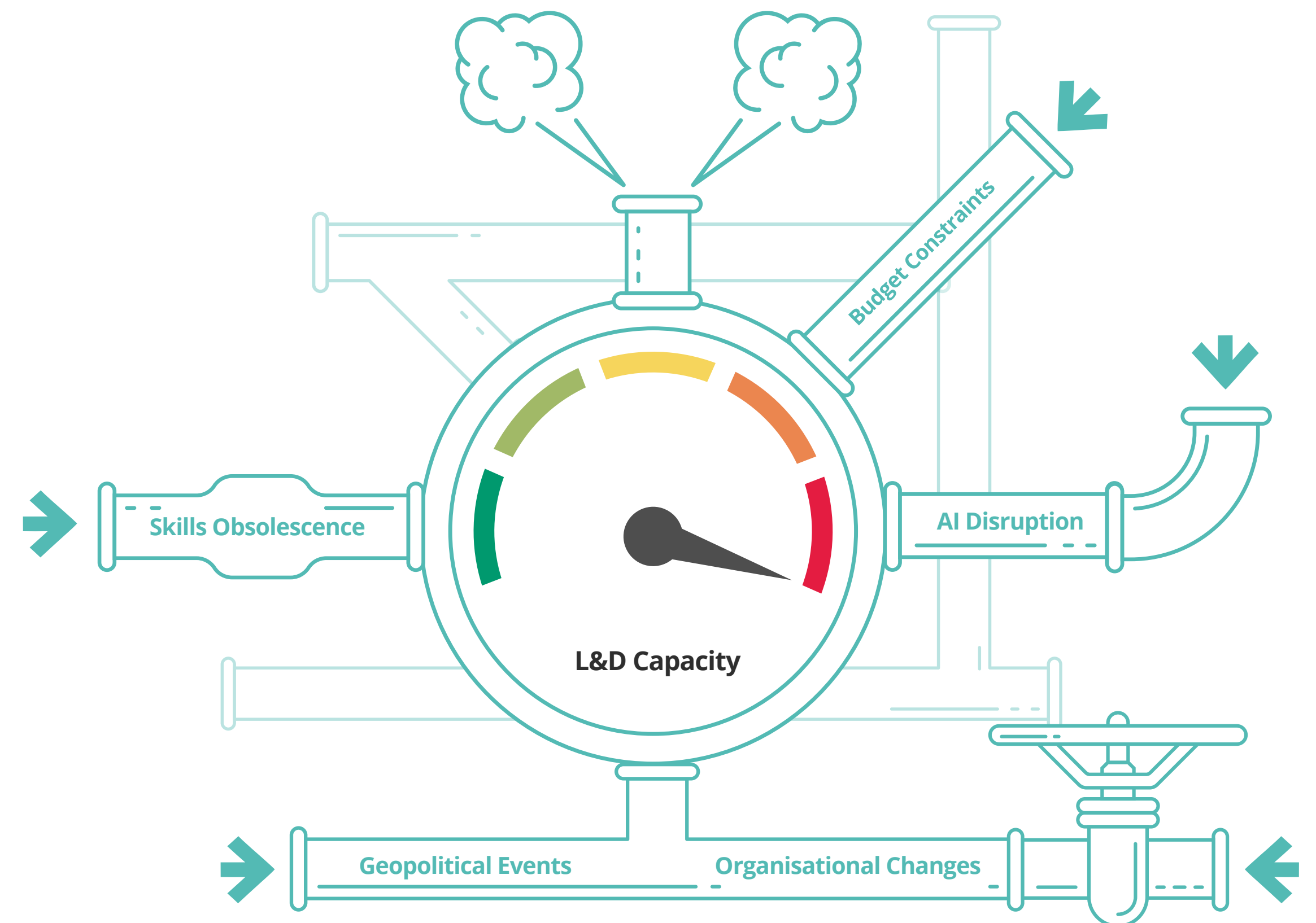
in technical and professional roles – but the pace of change is so rapid that they need to be refreshed more frequently than they once were. That's why agility is so important: employees must be able to adapt quickly to new tools and training requirements, and then immediately apply what they've learned to their work.

So how do you build these human skills when they are, by their nature, more subjective and difficult to measure?

And how does L&D align these skills with business objectives to build a future-ready workforce, when it's rarely seen as a true strategic partner?

This guide presents a three-pillar framework for crisis-ready L&D, highlighting the challenges L&D faces today and presenting clear and actionable techniques for you to help your organisation move from crisis mode to crisis-ready.

The Pressure Mounts as L&D Navigates Constant Disruption



The Great L&D Disruption

The skills crisis facing L&D today isn't a single challenge—it's a perfect storm of converging pressures that demand a fundamental rethink of how we develop our people.

Consider the pace of change: 39% of workers' core skills will need replacing by 2030, while skill half-lives have plummeted from 26 years to less than five. This skills revolution is compounded by a stark digital divide—18% of UK adults lack essential workplace digital skills, creating a £63 billion annual drain on the economy. Meanwhile, AI is simultaneously creating new roles like prompt engineers while threatening to displace others, leaving 47% of employees worried about their future. There are also concerning signs that employers aren't keeping up with training needs, with 60% of respondents in one survey saying they haven't received any AI training, and half planning to teach themselves.

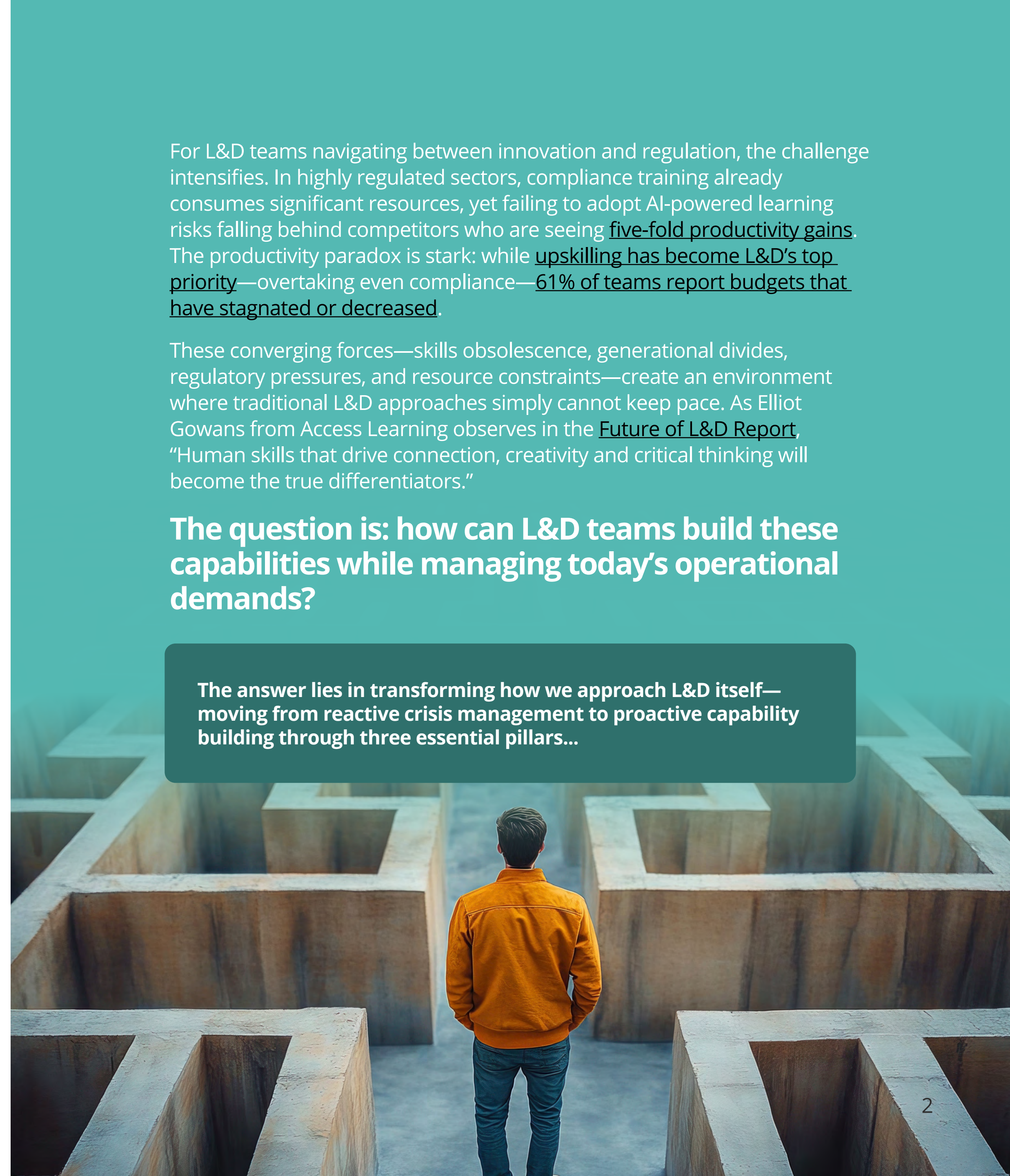
This technological disruption intersects with profound generational challenges. Gen-Z enters the workplace without critical soft skills in communication and resilience, while older workers risk being left behind by AI adoption. Traditional sectors like nursing and teaching face unprecedented churn, and with an increase in migration with 517,000 workers leaving the UK in 2024, the talent pool continues to shrink. The result? A workforce increasingly divided by skills, expectations, and opportunities.

For L&D teams navigating between innovation and regulation, the challenge intensifies. In highly regulated sectors, compliance training already consumes significant resources, yet failing to adopt AI-powered learning risks falling behind competitors who are seeing five-fold productivity gains. The productivity paradox is stark: while upskilling has become L&D's top priority—overtaking even compliance—61% of teams report budgets that have stagnated or decreased.

These converging forces—skills obsolescence, generational divides, regulatory pressures, and resource constraints—create an environment where traditional L&D approaches simply cannot keep pace. As Elliot Gowans from Access Learning observes in the Future of L&D Report, “Human skills that drive connection, creativity and critical thinking will become the true differentiators.”

The question is: how can L&D teams build these capabilities while managing today's operational demands?

The answer lies in transforming how we approach L&D itself—moving from reactive crisis management to proactive capability building through three essential pillars...



Three Pillars of crisis-ready L&D

These three pillars represent a fundamental shift in how L&D operates as a strategic partner during periods of volatility.

In an increasingly complex operating environment—where crises challenge existing skills and demand immediate organisation-wide adaptation—this framework provides the structure needed to build resilience while maintaining operational excellence.

Creating Organisational Resilience Through L&D

Strategic Agility

1

- ✓ The Cultural Foundation for Strategic Agility
- ✓ Communication as the Backbone of Agility
- ✓ Building Agility Through Proactive Capability Development

Stakeholder Collaboration

2

- ✓ Managers as Learning Champions
- ✓ The Change Catalyst Framework
- ✓ Building Connected Learning Through Technology

Intelligent Prioritisation

3

- ✓ The Art of Strategic Trade-offs
- ✓ Values-Driven Prioritisation Framework
- ✓ The Skills Priority Matrix

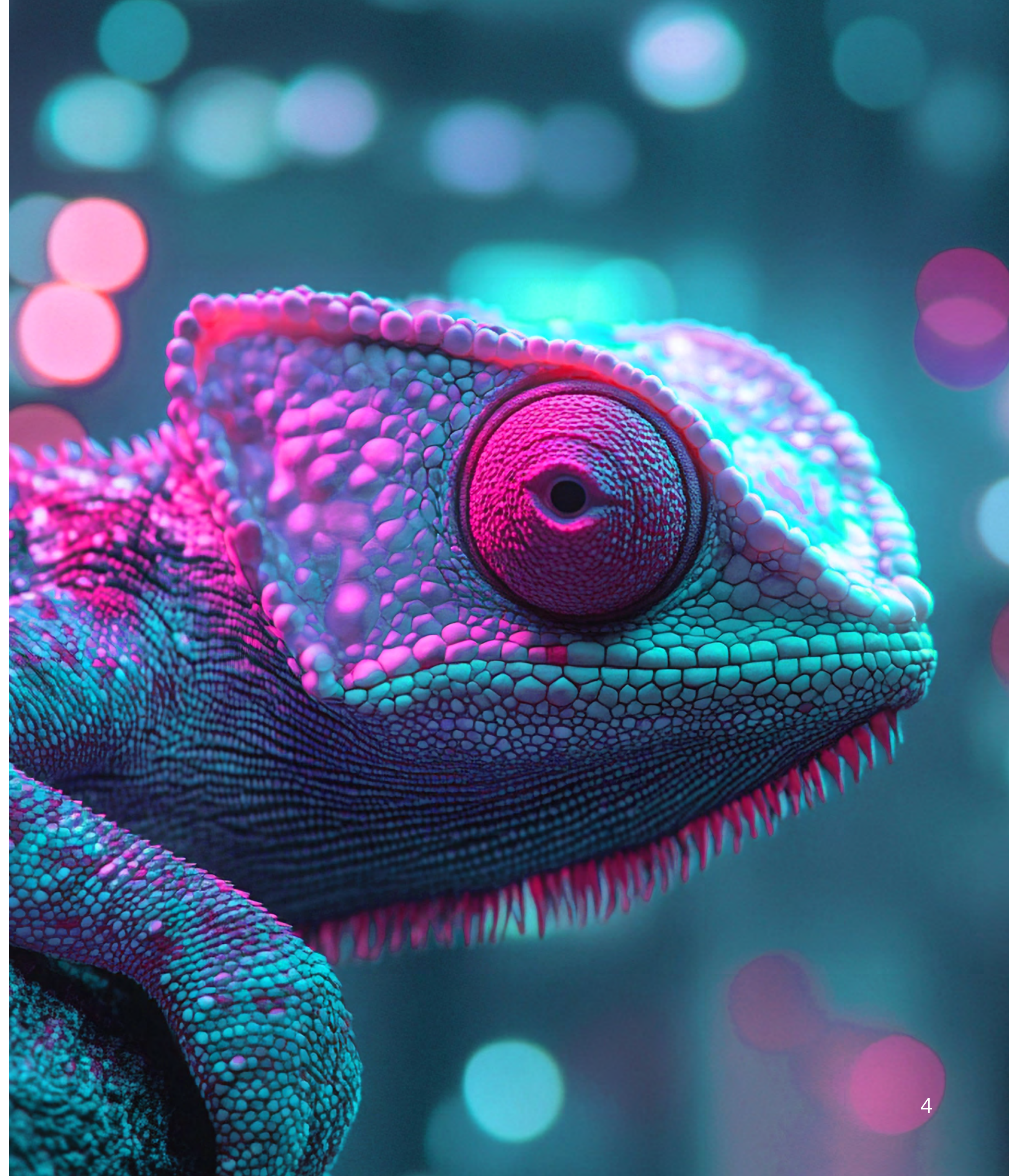
Pillar 1

Pillar 1: Strategic Agility

Strategic agility enables organisations to rapidly identify, develop, and deploy capabilities to constantly adapt as business needs change.

It shifts L&D from reactive training to proactive performance consulting—ensuring the right skills are available when needed.

This requires diagnostic conversations about business outcomes and performance gaps, plus frequent pulse checks instead of annual audits. Real-time visibility into KPI-linked metrics helps organisations map capabilities dynamically, moving from reactive to anticipatory mode—identifying gaps before they become critical.



Pillar 1

The Cultural Foundation for Strategic Agility

Rapid skill-building requires a continuous learning culture where development is embedded in daily work and owned by everyone. Without foundational capabilities like adaptability and growth mindset, employees can't quickly absorb or effectively apply new technical skills under pressure.

- ➔ **Embed learning in workflow** - Make skill development part of daily tasks, not separate from them
- ➔ **Encourage experimentation** - Create safe spaces for trying new approaches and learning from failures
- ➔ **Distribute ownership** - Position learning as everyone's responsibility, not just L&D's domain
- ➔ **Build foundational capabilities first** - Establish adaptability, self-directed learning, and growth mindsets before launching urgent skills training
- ➔ **Invest in soft skills as prerequisites** - Critical thinking, communication, and emotional intelligence enable rapid technical upskilling
- ➔ **Create systematic approaches** - Build learning infrastructure before crisis hits, not during



Pillar 1

Communication as the Backbone of Agility

When organisations face uncertainty, communication becomes the critical infrastructure that holds everything together. L&D must champion comprehensive strategies that help the workforce make sense of change – not just communicating what is changing, but why it matters and how to navigate transitions.

- ➔ **Establish predictable rhythms** - Regular leadership briefings, team check-ins, and digital pulse checks reduce anxiety
- ➔ **Enable two-way dialogue** - Use multiple channels for genuine conversation, not one-way broadcasting
- ➔ **Link individual to organisational** - Connect daily work explicitly to broader transformation goals
- ➔ **Build trust through transparency** - Share both successes and challenges openly
- ➔ **Provide context, not just content** - Explain why changes matter, what they mean for different roles, and how to navigate transitions
- ➔ **Maintain consistency across channels** - Ensure messages align whether delivered digitally, in-person, or through managers



Pillar 1

Building Agility Through Proactive Capability Development

Strategic agility isn't just about responding quickly – it's about building capabilities before they're desperately needed, creating a buffer of readiness that enables rapid pivots. This means reimagining traditional approaches like compliance training, transforming them from reactive tick-box exercises into proactive capability building that develops decision-making muscles before crisis hits.

- ➔ **Transform compliance into capability** - Use mandatory training as rehearsal for crisis decision-making and critical thinking
- ➔ **Embed scenario-based learning** - Mirror real crisis situations in training to develop decision-making muscles
- ➔ **Measure response quality, not just completion** - Track improved decision times and accuracy, not just training attendance
- ➔ **Build integrated infrastructure** - Connect automated tracking, predictive analytics, and development planning systems
- ➔ **Create capability buffers** - Develop adjacent skills that enable quick pivots to new requirements

Reactive > Proactive Transformation



Reactive

- Crisis hits
- Scramble for solutions
- Emergency training
- Firefighting
- Completion rates focus

- Performance Consulting
- Predictive Analytics
- Integrated Planning



Proactive

- Continuous monitoring
- Capability buffers
- Scenario-based learning
- Crisis-ready
- Response quality metrics

Pillar 1

Building Speed Without Sacrificing Quality

The [Harvard Business Impact study](#) identifies “speed to skill” as the critical metric for organisational learning. Traditional instructional design cycles need radical acceleration through modular content architecture and AI-powered features that enable rapid deployment without compromising quality.

- ➔ **Adopt modular architecture** - Create bite-sized, searchable content that employees access in their flow of work
- ➔ **Enable rapid recombination** - Design learning components that can be quickly reassembled as needs shift
- ➔ **Leverage AI acceleration** - Use intelligent recommendations, automated tracking, and predictive analytics
- ➔ **Focus on “speed to skill”** - Make time-to-competency the primary metric, not training hours completed
- ➔ **Transform from sequential to concurrent** - Deploy foundational content immediately while developing custom solutions in parallel



L&D’s own skills gaps mustn’t become a bottleneck: L&D teams must transform themselves to enable organisational agility—building new capabilities in data analytics, AI fluency, content curation, and diagnostic thinking.

Pillar 1

Building Agility Through Technology

Modern learning platforms enable rapid response through automated tracking and flexible content delivery that adapts to crisis-ready needs. The most effective systems combine comprehensive ready-to-go content libraries with AI-powered tools that streamline routine tasks while maintaining compliance standards.

- ➔ **Ready-to-deploy content libraries** - Comprehensive resources available for immediate deployment
- ➔ **Mobile-first accessibility** - Learning that reaches all employees regardless of location
- ➔ **Bite-sized, multi-format delivery** - Flexible content that fits into workflow moments
- ➔ **Automated CPD tracking** - Reduced administrative burden through intelligent reminders and reporting
- ➔ **Real-time visibility dashboards** - Immediate insight into progress and gaps
- ➔ **AI-powered efficiency tools** - Streamlined routine tasks and intelligent recommendations
- ➔ **Seamless system integration** - Connection with existing business tools while maintaining compliance



Pillar 2

Pillar 2: Stakeholder collaboration

The second pillar recognises that successful L&D requires alignment across all levels of leadership.

The LPI has urged L&D to 'engage with the executive leadership team' on 'growth targets, new markets, and innovation priorities' to understand strategic direction. This executive engagement provides the 'what' and 'why' of transformation—but sustainable change requires activating the entire leadership chain.



Pillar 2

Managers as Learning Champions

Managers bring unique value as the closest leaders to the work, seeing skills gaps emerge in real-time and having the daily touchpoints to embed learning into workflow.

- ➔ **Identify skills gaps in real-time** - Spot capability needs as they emerge on the ground
- ➔ **Contribute to learning strategy** - Provide input on what training will actually drive performance
- ➔ **Take ownership of team growth** - Accept responsibility for developing team capabilities
- ➔ **Translate strategic priorities** - Convert high-level goals into practical capability building
- ➔ **Embed learning in workflow** - Use daily touchpoints to reinforce skill development
- ➔ **Understand team capabilities intimately** - Know individual strengths and development areas
- ➔ **Act as connector managers** - Link team members to resources that accelerate development (boosting performance by up to 26% per Gartner)
- ➔ **Triple high-performer likelihood** - Increase chances of direct reports becoming top performers
- ➔ **Boost engagement by 40%** - Drive higher team engagement through active development support



Pillar 2

The change catalyst framework

For managers to effectively bridge strategy and execution, they need to embrace their dual role as both empowerment agents and resilience builders within their teams. The most effective managers give teams a voice in their development journey while making the 'why' visible, connecting individual work to strategic goals so teams understand how their growth supports organisational transformation.

- ➔ **Give teams a voice** - Encourage creative problem-solving and feedback rather than simply cascading training requirements
- ➔ **Make the 'why' visible** - Connect individual work to strategic goals so teams understand how their growth supports transformation
- ➔ **Celebrate short-term wins** - Maintain momentum throughout long transformations when change fatigue threatens
- ➔ **Normalise continuous evolution** - Frame change as growth rather than disruption through daily coaching moments
- ➔ **Facilitate reflection** - Turn experiences into insights through structured debriefs and learning conversations
- ➔ **Develop emotional agility** - Build resilience and adaptability alongside technical capabilities
- ➔ **Master capability conversations** - Uncover real skills gaps through diagnostic questioning
- ➔ **Create psychological safety** - Build environments where experimentation and learning from failure are encouraged
- ➔ **Advocate for development time** - Ensure learning happens within workflow, not on top of it



Pillar 2

Building connected learning through technology

When managers become learning champions, they need tools that support rather than burden them – modern learning ecosystems that provide instant visibility into team progress and skills gaps. But stakeholder collaboration isn't just about empowering managers—employees need content libraries offering resources for resilience, skills development, and immediate guidance. When people can access the right learning at the right time, they develop the ownership managers are trying to foster. Effective solutions connect these collaborative efforts, with technology enabling everyone to play their part: managers guiding, employees learning, and L&D teams orchestrating.

- ➔ **Instant visibility dashboards** - Provide managers with real-time team progress and skills gap insights
- ➔ **Extensive content libraries** - Enable employees to build resilience and find immediate guidance
- ➔ **Bite-sized, mobile learning** - Allow teams to engage with development at their own pace
- ➔ **Real-time intervention tracking** - Show L&D teams where support is needed most urgently
- ➔ **Workflow integration** - Embed learning within existing business tools and processes
- ➔ **Automated administrative support** - Use reminders and tracking to reduce management overhead
- ➔ **Connected ecosystem approach** - Link managers, employees, and L&D teams seamlessly
- ➔ **Performance analytics** - Transform capability conversations into actionable data insights



Pillar 3

Pillar 3: Intelligent prioritisation

The third and final pillar recognises that in times of constraint and rapid change, not all learning investments are equal.

Success requires L&D teams to make tough decisions about where to focus limited resources for maximum impact—maintaining business continuity today and building competitive advantage for tomorrow.



Pillar 3

The art of strategic trade-off

Every organisation faces the same dilemma: urgent operational needs compete with important future capabilities. Crisis-ready L&D teams understand that intelligent prioritisation isn't about doing more—it's about doing what matters most.

- ➔ **Resist the loudest voice** - Avoid chasing every emerging trend or responding to whoever shouts loudest
- ➔ **Define clear criteria** - Establish explicit standards for all investment decisions
- ➔ **Identify survival skills** - Determine which capabilities keep the business running today
- ➔ **Map future success** - Pinpoint capabilities that will determine competitive advantage in six months
- ➔ **Recognise what can wait** - Identify training that can be deferred without operational consequence
- ➔ **Frame as strategic choices** - Position these as business decisions affecting survival and growth, not just training priorities



Pillar 3

Values-driven prioritisation framework

Making tough resource choices requires more than data – it needs a values-based approach that maintains trust during difficult decisions. When resources are constrained, organisations must prioritise “power skills” that multiply impact across roles rather than single-problem solutions.

- ➔ **Build transparency** - Openly communicate why certain skills take priority over others
- ➔ **Foster unity** - Involve teams in identifying critical capabilities rather than imposing top-down decisions
- ➔ **Navigate transitions with dignity** - Be honest about obsolete skills while supporting career transitions
- ➔ **Frame uncertainty positively** - Position constraints as catalysts for focused innovation
- ➔ **Prioritise power skills** - Focus on critical thinking, adaptability, communication, and problem-solving
- ➔ **Multiply impact across roles** - Choose capabilities that enable multiple challenges, not single problems
- ➔ **Maintain trust through difficulty** - Keep communication channels open during tough prioritisation decisions



Pillar 3

The skills priority matrix

In practice, intelligent prioritisation means categorising capabilities into three distinct levels:

Priority 1

High impact + immediate need (survival skills) Capabilities that keep your organisation functioning today. They include core competencies for current operations, essential compliance requirements, fundamental customer service skills, and basic digital literacy for hybrid working.

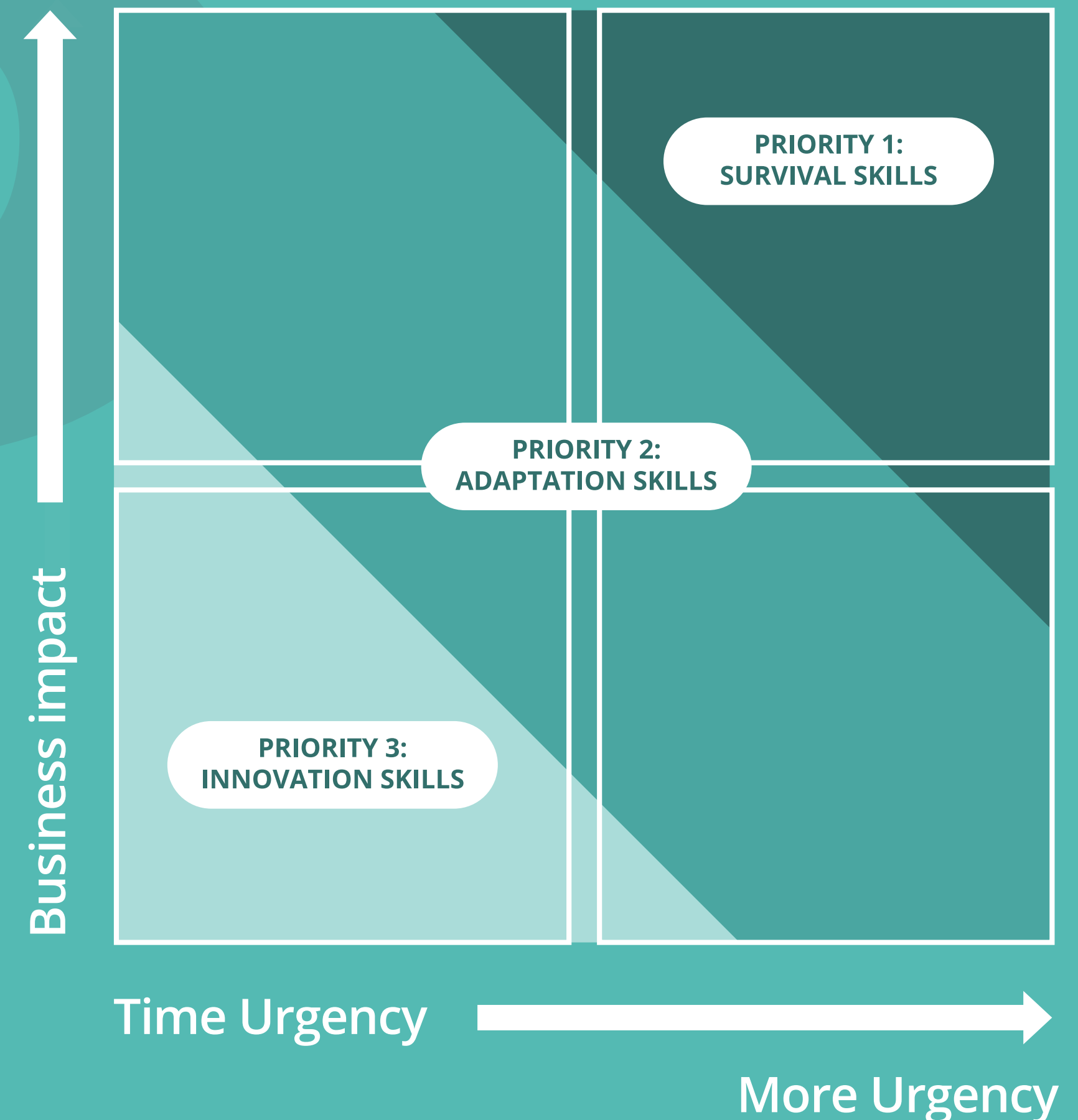
Priority 2

High impact + future need (adaptation skills) Capabilities that are becoming mission-critical but not yet essential for daily operations. AI collaboration skills, advanced data literacy, digital transformation competencies, and emerging regulatory requirements are among them. These skills prevent competitive disadvantage and talent exodus.

Priority 3

Low impact + any timeline (innovation skills) Experimental technologies without clear business applications, speculative skill development, and training that sounds impressive but doesn't directly impact performance. These can be deferred during crises without operational consequence.

Higher Impact




Pillar 3

Technology that enables intelligent prioritisation

Making informed decisions about resource allocation requires comprehensive data across your entire learning ecosystem, transforming prioritisation from instinct-based decisions into evidence-driven strategy. The most effective ecosystems combine learning management capabilities with extensive content libraries, providing both the data and the resources needed for agile prioritisation while revealing where investment yields real results.

- ➔ **Combine LMS and content libraries** - Access both analytics and resources for agile prioritisation
- ➔ **Automate compliance tracking** - Ensure regulatory requirements never slip through the cracks
- ➔ **Deploy real-time dashboards** - Track completion rates, engagement patterns, and skill application
- ➔ **Implement skills assessment tools** - Identify gaps before they become critical
- ➔ **Enable rapid resource shifts** - Use ready-to-deploy content to address emerging priorities quickly
- ➔ **Leverage AI recommendations** - Spot patterns in content effectiveness and upskilling needs
- ➔ **Segment learning data** - Analyse by role, department, or strategic priority for targeted allocation
- ➔ **Free resources through self-service** - Use content libraries for self-directed learning on lower priorities
- ➔ **Build confidence through insights** - Make tough decisions knowing you have data to support them

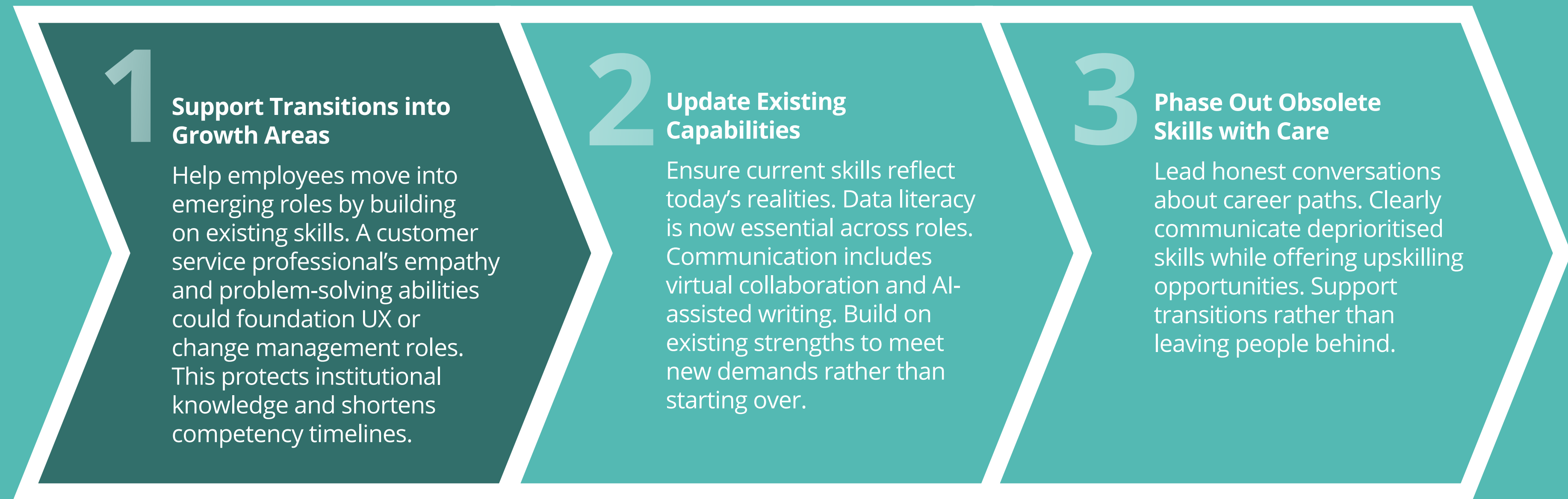


The three pillars of crisis-ready L&D don't operate in isolation—they form an integrated system that creates organisational resilience. Strategic agility provides the rapid response capability, stakeholder collaboration ensures alignment and buy-in, while intelligent prioritisation focuses resources where they matter most.

Preparing for skill transitions

AI might be the most obvious disruptor to traditional skills but it's not the only one. Climate change, demographic shifts, and evolving business models all demand new capabilities whilst rendering others obsolete. The challenge isn't just identifying what's changing—it's managing the human side of these transitions with dignity and purpose.

A Three-Pronged Approach



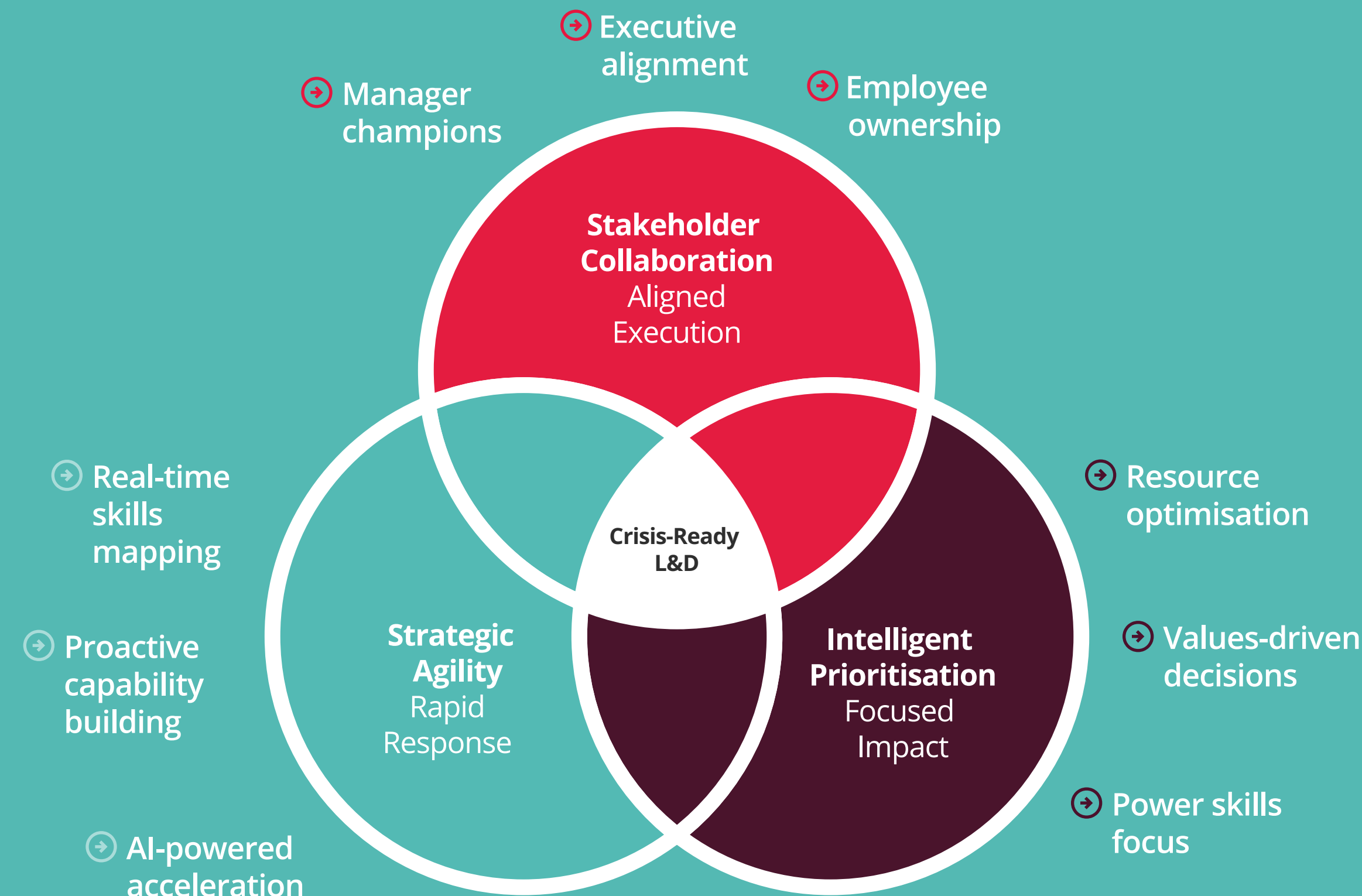
Continuous monitoring reveals transition points before they become crises—whether through performance metrics showing training isn't improving outcomes, competitor movements signalling new requirements, or regulatory changes mandating new capabilities.

By acting on these insights early and giving people time to adapt, a human-centred approach can then transform potential disruption into planned evolution - maintaining continuity whilst building competitive advantage.

How the pillars work together

Consider a manufacturing company facing AI disruption. Strategic agility enables them to quickly identify which production roles will be augmented by AI and rapidly develop training modules. Through stakeholder collaboration, production managers become learning champions, identifying specific skill gaps on the factory floor. Intelligent prioritisation ensures that safety-critical AI supervision skills are developed first, followed by efficiency-enhancing capabilities.

This integrated approach means that when uncertainty strikes—whether it’s new regulations, technology disruption, or market shifts—the organisation has the frameworks, relationships, and decision-making capabilities to respond effectively. The result is not just crisis survival but competitive advantage through superior adaptability.



Nobody can predict the future which is why L&D must prepare for anything – something that can be achieved using the frameworks we’ve outlined in this report. Success in uncertainty requires more than frameworks—it demands a values-driven culture built on trust, honesty, and unity. Organisations that view uncertainty as a catalyst for innovation rather than a constraint will emerge stronger.

Transform disruption into innovation

When disruption happens, organisations can either adapt deliberately and strategically, or simply react to events as they unfold. Those who choose the latter invariably end up worse off, lagging behind their competitors because they can't innovate fast enough or trying to spend their way out of the crisis. In contrast, organisations that use a crisis as a transformation opportunity tend to fare better. They don't focus solely on damage limitation but instead continue to invest in targeted skills development that create value – and are ready to scale this up, not down.

The frameworks and recommendations outlined in this report can be applied to any organisation but context is key. The specific priorities, timeframes, and approaches will vary based on your industry, organisational maturity, and crisis type. That said, the principles remain the same. You'll need to prioritise ruthlessly, design for agility, activate networks, deploy systematically and transform strategically in order to build a resilient, future-ready workforce and organisation.





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